

Being in prison, the stakes are extremely high. Every potential argument or disagreement could equal potential violence. Every fight could equal a potential loss of life. This is a very abnormal environment, if you will—a society within a society.

This being said, it is imperative that you (the reader) remain open-minded as I take you on a journey behind the criminal justice culture, and the additional challenges individuals face daily while incarcerated.

Speaking as an individual who has spent—wasted—23 years of my life in and out of the California Department of Corrections, I turn 46 years old towards the end of this year. This means half of my existence has been behind bars and barbwire.

Reflecting back on my life, specifically at the things that I valued in life, I realized that I never gave any substance to the things I truly valued. Of course, if you questioned my values back then, my first response would have been my family, friends, money, and respect. More than likely, probably not even in this specific order.

Like an actor in a movie, I created a character in my mind and became that person I made. I looked at my gang involvement and embraced it. For me, it represented social status. I was living a lifestyle back then that might be described as predatory and parasitic. Far from a normal social viewpoint, I took penitentiary chances. My actions brought on unintentional consequences.

My thoughts when I first came to prison...all I ever wanted to do was just live—do my time as comfortable as I can. I wanted to live like others did on the street. That was just my mind state and warped sense of thinking. Being a fool became the psychological make of who I wanted to be.

As I grew up, I thought I wasn't going to be anything. I thought the only good I am is for gangbanging, pimping, and selling drugs. That is the life and road that I travelled.

I paid an extreme price for being unable to separate those old abusive patterns. There were times that I barely escaped death, being in gang feuds, race riots, and getting shot at by the gun tower. In and out of the hole (administrative segregation unit).

Like gambling, I couldn't accept my losses. I did not want to accept my losses and move on. Admitting that I was wrong was an obstacle. I thought that I could continue to play since I had some money. Still I thought I could break even or get back.

I could not continue down this maladaptive path any longer. One of our greatest fears as prisoners, and those who cause harm to others is responsibility, which leads to a perceived separation: death of a relationship. I fear falling short of that responsibility. I also had a fear of social and emotional independence. Fear of having no one beyond myself to blame for wrong turns, wrong investments, and wrong decisions. Independent responsibility was something that I spent most of my lifetime trying to avoid. This act was very unhealthy. Don't get me wrong; some of my most positive experiences I have had were behind these walls.

Understanding where I may fall sort within the dynamics of rehabilitation allowed me to see myself clearly. I began to recognize my internal goals so that it will match my external behaviors.

I cannot imagine a world without prisons, because a social structure without government involvement or law and order would be total chaos.

Being in prison is like taking a journey back in time. Now, I have an idea about the struggles that my parents and grandparents faced growing up. At times, the tensions are so thick in the air that you can actually feel it in your bones. People learn prejudice in the home as children before they exhibit it as adults. Therefore, prejudice attitudes inside these walls is permitted and quite often reinforced by custody.

This brings me to talk about the Correctional Officers having these dehumanizing attitudes. Not all follow this tradition; you will always have some that defy the odds. What's so different if roles were reversed?

Just seeking an education or vocational skill on a day-to-day basis could be very challenging. Having to strip down to your boxers and socks, place clothing on counter, squat, cough, and spread your cheeks really does add a psychological affect to any human being.

Rehabilitation is a new word for me and others. Light at the end of this tunnel is now available. Before, I was headed away in a totally different direction. My whole life has changed. Today, I am doing things that I had never thought about. I am back on track and I feel so complete.